

Trinity 15 (2013)

Philemon 1

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister and
Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about
your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your
partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of
every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy
and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's
people.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to
do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—
an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my
son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless
to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep
him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for
the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any
favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason
he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back
forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very
dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the
Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he
has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing
this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very
self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh
my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you
will do even more than I ask.

Luke 14

²⁵ Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ "If anyone
comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and
sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And
whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate
the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if you lay the
foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you,

³⁰ saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

³⁴ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? ³⁵ It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

I said a couple of weeks ago I didn’t want to sound like Uncle Albert, who starts every sentence “during the war...” (or in my case “when I was in Bible College”). So I’ll rephrase that a little... when we *started* at Trinity College we were encouraged to buy ourselves an NRSV, that’s the New Revised Standard Version of the bible. The reason they recommend and use this version is because they say it’s the most faithful and accurate of all the translations. So I refer to the NRSV when I start preparing my sermons, and I must say I’ve been tempted to suggest to both PCCs that our churches should change our pew bibles a) to bring us closer to the original texts and b) to make sure we’re all reading from the same hymn book as it were. But as Joan once accused me of being snobbish for calling the Good News Bible childish, and because the NRSV at times uses too inclusive a language (e.g. “follow me and I will make you fish for people”) I’ve never had the full conviction to push for that particular change. (that and the fact that we can’t afford it – but that’s another sermon for another day!)

What I will say, is that both the NRSV and the NIV (the New International Version which they use at St Paul’s) present things in a much more challenging language. Only a couple weeks ago, we heard Jesus say He’d come to divide brother against sister and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. This week brings an even stronger tone,

²⁶ “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even (hate) their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

I read this on Monday and said,

“Oh please dear Lord, I know I have to love You with all my heart and soul and body and mind and strength, but do I really have to *hate* my own family – even myself?”

So I turned to dear old St Paul for comfort and there he is urging Philemon to “*take Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me*”.

Oh, nice! That's what I call plain talking! He was *useless!* – Fine, say what you mean Paul why don't you! It would seem then, that over the last few weeks the Lord has been giving it to us straight. Don't mess about with pleasantries; just tell it how it is. And it would be easy to kid ourselves that this is God's license to be plain rude to one another, but that would be a wrong and dangerous path to follow. Let's take a closer look at both our readings this morning, starting with Paul's letter to Philemon.

This is one of three personal letters written by Paul, and here he's making a personal plea to a good friend Philemon, a member of the Colossian Church, urging him to take back his slave, Onesimus, who once stole from him and did a runner. So you immediately begin to understand why Paul would say, *"formerly he was useless to you"*.

A slave who turns out to be a tea-leaf and then runs away isn't a lot of use to anyone! But something happened to Onesimus, something life transforming, along similar lines to that which happened to Paul himself. After stealing from Philemon, the wayward slave fled to Rome, where he probably thought he could lose himself in the busy streets of the capital. However, he couldn't run away from the Lord! His light-fingers landed him in prison where he met Paul, and like just about everyone else who ever met Paul, he ended up giving his life to the Lord, which is what Paul refers to when he writes in verse 10, *"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains"*.

So Paul writes to Philemon, and reintroduces his slave to him, now reborn in Christ, and explains that he's returning Onesimus to him, no longer as a slave but as a brother. Now Paul of course was a powerful man, whom I'd guess not many people would dare turn down. However, there's something about Paul's letter and the way it's written, that would make him very hard to resist. Just look at those opening verses, *"To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker - grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus"*.

Sadly, thanks to texts and emails, the art of letter writing has fallen by the wayside. But wow, what a beautiful way to greet someone, wishing them grace and peace and praising them for the work they're doing. It's enough to soften the hardest of hearts, and yet that's *not* what Paul's up to here. This is genuine praise, and notice how Paul's fulfilling the Lord's commandment, to love God and neighbour. There can surely be no doubt that Paul loved his God more than just about any other living being, and because of his love of God, his love of Philemon automatically follows, *"I always thank my God as I remember you"*.

This letter, and the love with which it is written, love for God and for a brother in Christ, is a lesson for us all. Paul tactfully pleads to Philemon to forgive his wayward slave and welcome him back as his born-again brother. I can't put it better than my Life Application Bible does...

"This letter is a masterpiece of grace and tact and a profound demonstration of the power of Christ and of true Christian fellowship".

And it leads me to question one this morning. Who has offended you in the past? Who do you find the hardest person in the world to forgive – and how would you find the right way of going about it? The answer might well be here, in Paul's letter to Philemon.

So let's now return to our Gospel reading, and these tough words of Jesus. It makes you realise how wrong those Victorian carol writers were with lyrics like, "Gentle Jesus meek and mild". He may have looked meek and mild as a babe in a manger, but right now, surrounded by a crowd of expectant admirers, (and of course, a few opponents waiting for Him to slip up) Jesus pulls no punches. And the fact is, He can't afford to. As Paul writes when he urges the Ephesians to put on the full armour of God,

"our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms". (Eph 6:12)

This is serious stuff, and it will do us no good to pussy-foot around. This world, teetering on the brink of God-knows-what, needs to hear His word, His Truth, His Will

But what does Jesus mean in verse ²⁶

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple"?

That's a bit strong isn't it? Isn't this the very language that drives zealots to acts of terrorism? Aren't these the very words the atheists and secularists love to ram down our throats?

It's days like this is when I prefer...

The Message

Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother etc
or

The Good News Bible

²⁶ "Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother etc.

The NRSV may be the truest translation, and the truth may set you free, but occasionally I think there are better ways of telling it. As Francis of Assisi so famously put it, “Preach the Gospel – use words if necessary”!

It’s not what Jesus says, it’s the way He tells `em!
It’s not what you do, but the way that you do it!

Jesus ends this oration with a word about salt.

³⁴ *“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”* ³⁵ *It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”*

I could preach an entire sermon on salt. It has so many uses in preserving, protecting and flavouring food, and every property has a parallel in Jesus-language. But the parallel He’s pointing to here is - I’m quite sure – all about flavour. A tiny sprinkling of salt can change the flavour of an entire dish, just as we, if we truly love Him, can transform the most bland banal – often traumatized existence into abundant life – for ourselves, and for the people around us.

Gill gave me this poem last night, its writer is anonymous, but it is from one of David Watson’s books
(read)

So we can take a lesson from Paul – and from Jesus - this morning. Remembering that we are in the midst of a galactic battle, between the powers of heaven and hell. There’s very little “wiggle room” and no time to beat around the bush. It is indeed a matter of life or death, but we need not be afraid, because we have the most powerful life-support resource at our disposal; the love of God. And the reason Jesus is so passionate for us to love Him more than anything else in the world, is because that life-transforming love is dependant upon – and proportionate to – our love for Him.

Amen